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SWAN HILLS COLLOQUIUM

DISCUSSION PAPER

by

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and
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for

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Edmonton, Alberta

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FOREWORD

You have talked about Swan Hills with the consultant (Lyle Benson). You were positive about wanting to work together with other groups. This Discussion Paper reports on the issues identified by interviewing over 40 people from the oil industry, and local and provincial agencies.

There are differing views regarding the issues. Three issues appear to be dominant in the future development of the Swan Hills area: i) the **viability and stability** of the community; ii) **municipal taxes**; and iii) the **image** of the Town. Taken together, you related these to eight (8) other components or sub-issues.

With the Discussion Paper completed, the consultants - Lyle Benson with the assistance of Floyd Dykeman (Appendix A) - are now prepared for the Swan Hills Colloquium on October 26 and 27, 1988. The consultants will be assisting you and the Town in identifying problems and generating solutions locally.

I look forward to meeting with you and sharing together our knowledge and insights.

Tom Forgrave, Assistant Deputy Minister
Alberta Municipal Affairs, Edmonton.

THE TOWN OF SWAN HILLS

The Town of Swan Hills was first incorporated in 1967 following Home Oil's discovery of the Swan Hills Oil Fields. Since the late 1950's the community has developed as an oil and gas industry town servicing such companies such as Home Oil, Esso Resources Canada, Shell Oil, Amoco Canada, Federated Pipelines, and Petro Canada.

Like many other single industry communities, fluctuations in the world market have meant boom and bust cycles for Swan Hills. The Town's heavy dependence upon the oil and gas industry has resulted in developmental problems characteristic of many Canadian single industry towns.

The Town's population has declined from 2,497 in 1982 to 2,359 in 1988. In comparison to provincial averages, the Town has a higher proportion of its population in the 0-14 and 20-44 age groupings and a lower proportion of senior citizens.

The Town accommodates a transient work force, although this has slowed in recent years, and has a high proportion of unmarried adult males and females. As with most single industry towns, there is a high ratio of males to females.

Labour force participation rates remain high and unemployment remains low. However, there are a number of adults, primarily women, who are interested in finding work within the community.

Income levels are high, and the disposable income within the community is particularly high. One factor which contributes to the high disposable income is the large proportion of housing which is company-owned and subsidized in Swan Hills. Although this higher disposable income should benefit local retailers, there is a high incidence of out-of-Town shopping.

Rental units account for two-thirds of the housing stock. Residential properties form the majority (approximately 70%) of the assessment base. This has forced the Town into levying higher municipal taxes than is desirable, in order to provide the present level of municipal services. Documented studies of the community have indicated both strengths and weaknesses in services, facilities and physical setting. To further capitalize on available data, the municipal council has undertaken private initiatives also aimed at providing a better understanding of the Town's strengths and liabilities.

One of those initiatives involved approaching Alberta Municipal Affairs for assistance in organizing a "Swan Hills Colloquium". This colloquium will be a forum which encourages a self-help approach to problems in the Swan Hills area through discussion among the many groups involved with the Town and its provision of services. (The word Colloquium or Colloquy has a latin origin meaning conversation i.e. 'com', together + 'loqui', to speak.)

THE PROJECT

THE PURPOSE

The purpose of the colloquium is to:

a) provide a forum for discussion between the community of Swan Hills and other interested and concerned parties; and
b) through this discussion, assist the Town in identifying problems and generating solutions to local development concerns.

THE THEME

"Speaking Together For Our Futures", as the theme for the colloquium, reflects the discussions to take place among all concerned parties about the future of the Town of Swan Hills.

The theme also recognizes that the groups involved have different needs and therefore different perspectives on the issues. The colloquium is based on the premise that the diverse groups involved must clearly establish where agreement and/or disagreement exists before any solutions can be generated.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Representatives of the four groups who have an interest in the community have been invited to participate in the colloquium. These include people from the:

1. Town of Swan Hills, School Board and Hospital Board;
2. Government Human Service Agencies;
3. Improvement Districts 15, 16 and 17; and
4. Oil and Gas Industry.

In addition, representatives of Alberta Municipal Affairs will participate in the colloquium.

THE PROCESS

The colloquium process involves at least four steps. These include:

1. Interview individuals from all four groups.

   A total of 44 interviews have been conducted with representatives of the four groups. Thirty five (35) interviews were conducted in person, and the remainder were conducted by telephone.

2. Document the interview responses and synthesize into major issues and concerns.

3. From the synthesis, prepare a Discussion Paper which outlines the different perspectives on each of the issues identified.

   This discussion paper has been prepared on a strict basis of neutrality by the consultants. The paper presents the respondents' perceptions of the issues.

4. Hold a colloquium in Swan Hills.
   At the colloquium, the participants will comment on the Discussion Paper, form issue groups to generate solutions and action plans, and establish networks for their implementation.

THE ISSUES

The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to identify the issues as reported by those interviewed. In reading this paper, you will note that there are clearly differing and sometimes conflicting views regarding some of the issues. These are reported in a neutral manner so that industry, community and government leaders can begin the colloquium by appreciating that there are different views. Also, one recognizes that ongoing dialogue will be required for problem solving after the colloquium.

From the interviews, many stressed three issues which are important to the future development of the Swan Hills area. These include:

1. **VIABILITY AND STABILITY** of the Community,

2. **MUNICIPAL TAXES**, and

3. **IMAGE** of the Town.

You will recognize these three issues are inter-dependent and have several related sub-issues. Figure 1 provides you with an illustration of the relationship between the issues identified in the interviews.

VIABILITY AND STABILITY

A state of viability and stability for the Town is defined by those interviewed as:

(1) broadening the tax base, to provide for a better ratio between residential and commercial/industrial assessment;
(2) aiming for less dependence upon the fluctuating oil industry, by diversifying the economic base of Swan Hills;
(3) decreasing the high level of retail expenditure outside the community;
(4) changing attitudes towards the community among residents and non-residents; and
(5) encouraging the development of small businesses while attracting another major employer.

Those interviewed said the Town has been developing and implementing plans, however, there is still no clearly stated or shared vision, of the Town's present situation or future among all the groups interviewed.

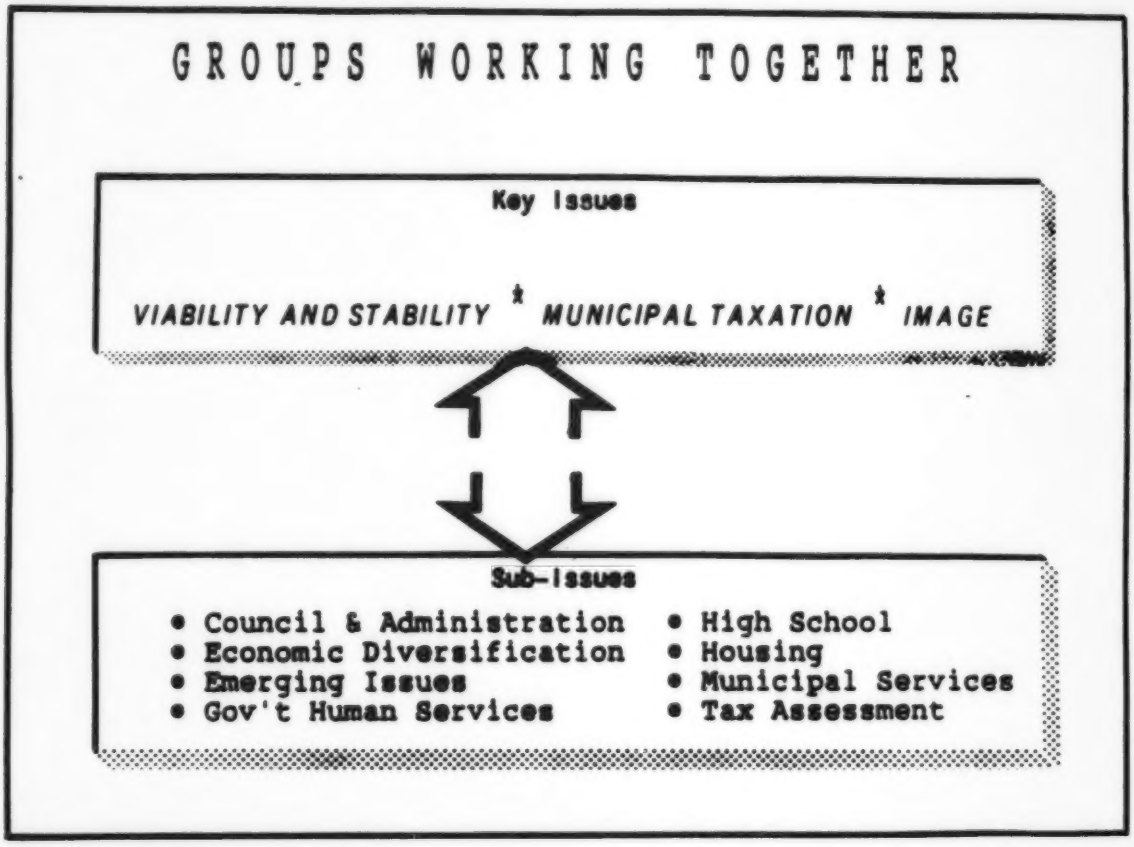
Those interviewed indicate that a joint effort among the Town, government and industry is needed to address the Town's future. The diverse set of interests involved must work together to address the question of future viability and stability.

MUNICIPAL TAXATION

Many of those interviewed suggested viability and stability will be achieved by broadening the tax base of the Town. They also emphasized the high taxes paid by property owners within the community.

FIGURE 1

LINKAGES AMONG KEY ISSUES AND SUB-ISSUES
FROM THE INTERVIEWS



From the 44 interviews, three issues emerged as being dominant or key. Also another eight sub-issues were mentioned by many, in relation to the key ones. Many of these issues need to be addressed to enable further development of the Swan Hills area, over both the short and long term.

~~The~~ Town ~~is faced with the need to attract additional development to broaden the tax base~~. More critical and immediate however, ~~is~~ the Town's ~~current~~ struggle to generate sufficient revenue to maintain existing services and facilities. As a result, the Town may be "downsizing" its services to financially balance in the immediate future.

~~Some of those interviewed indicate that~~ New developments for the Town will require an additional increase ~~in taxes that is~~ over and above an already high tax levy. There were alternatives proposed by those interviewed including:

1. the annexation of improvement district lands to broaden the Town's tax base;
2. an increase in the Industrial Tax Transfer (ITT);
3. a greater resource revenue sharing by the Province (for example, those interviewed indicate that the Swan Hills area contributes 12% of the oil and gas revenues to the Province while accommodating 1/1000th of the Provincial population - many would like to see a "fairer deal") or more grants;
4. an increase in the commercial and industrial tax base;
5. the development of agreements with Improvement Districts 15, 16, and 17 as well as the oil companies for the provision of ambulance, garbage and fire protection services; or
6. some workable combination of the above options.

The oil companies pay a high proportion of the residential taxes since they own a considerable portion of the housing stock. Oil company representatives wish to maintain an "arm's-length" relationship with the municipal taxation issue. ~~As a solution, some of those interviewed propose that the Town develop a long-range capital plan.~~

IMAGE

The third key issue involved image. The development of a stable and viable community, and the ability to broaden the tax base of the community, are seen ~~by many~~ as necessary for the projection and maintenance of a positive municipal image. This image will have a positive effect upon those in the Swan Hills area, within industry, ~~and among external groups such as~~ government, the business community and tourists. There also seems to be contributing to the image problems. Still, when driving around main street, top of Almost all of those interviewed indicate that negative attitudes about the Town and its image must be addressed to progress on other problems. Also those interviewed felt the attitudes of local residents are becoming more positive towards the Town. For example the residents care for the community and help each other when needed.

The Town Council has taken steps to work with other communities to project a more positive image of the area. An example of such a project would be the "Grizzly Trail". Despite the supportive comments about these efforts, those interviewed indicate considerable image problems among residents, outsiders and the industry.

Many of those interviewed feel that outsiders maintain an image of "Swan Hills in the ~~1950's~~" and think immediately of mud, trailers, and rowdiness. With this image, ~~as you would suspect,~~ it is difficult to attract business investment. Add'l - some

It ~~is felt by some in the industry that~~ companies use Swan Hills as a training ground for their staff. This supports an image of Swan Hills as a community where an employee works to gain experience and then moves on to "bigger and better things". ~~Many note, both industry and government need to clearly show they are committed to the community for the long term~~.

The locational factors of the community are also mentioned as further contributing to a negative image of the Town. These included being isolated, built on a hill, with no surrounding population, poor weather and high elevation.

There is support for the colloquium process among those interviewed. Many think it will serve as a positive first step in determining what all parties must do to contribute to a more positive Town image. Two specific requirements mentioned are: the need for involvement of younger citizens on Town council; and the need to develop community pride among school children.

ISSUE LINKAGE

By developing and enhancing the Swan Hills community will mean that various groups, including the Town, will be effectively contributing to its social and economic viability. Achieving this viable and stable community requires the resolution of the taxation issue. This will allow the community to pursue a pro-active social, economic and physical plan.

However, enhancement of the community requires an improvement in the present image of the community in order to attract economic development activities which then contribute to the expansion of the tax base and positively affect the viability and image of the Town. Clearly, the three major issue areas are linked and must be dealt with in a integrated fashion by all involved groups.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE FUTURE

During the information-gathering stage of this project it became obvious to the consultant that those interviewed are positive about wanting to work together to address the problems of Swan Hills. Their willingness to

participate in the colloquium process reflects a commitment to promoting greater understanding as a foundation for problem solving in the area.

The following range of comments were offered regarding the groups working together:

(1) while in the past groups did not work together, it is starting to happen more often within the community;
(2) the Town Council and the administration have a very positive image with groups that they have worked with in the past;
(3) the MLAs have done much to help Swan Hills;
(4) more involvement by the Federal Government is needed;
(5) while many of the issues can be resolved locally there are issues that are complex and will require outside resolutions and resources; and
(6) greater presence of the Government of Alberta is required as a working partner in the problem solving process.

EIGHT SUB-ISSUES

As well as providing details of the three key issues, those interviewed identified a number of other related components or sub-issues. These sub-issues must be carefully considered in any action plans for the future development of Swan Hills area. As noted in Figure 1, there are seven specific sub-issues gleaned from the interviews. The eighth, titled 'Emerging Issues', would include other concerns as well as some which may be brought up at the colloquium.

From the interviews, the sub-issues were given different characteristics depending largely on which key issue one was emphasizing. What follows is a brief discussion of the sub-issues in relation to the three key issues.

VIABILITY AND STABILITY

Economic Diversification

The Town has developed a housing plan, industrial plan, and downtown expansion plan -- all of which are awaiting community and Council approval. They are also working on an economic diversification plan. All of these initiatives are viewed positively by those interviewed.

However, many respondents question whether the current Town diversification targets of coal and tourism development are appropriate sectors for future economic growth. Many of those interviewed felt the efforts by the Town to diversify the economic base must ensure that the community benefits.

For example, respondents note that the location of the waste treatment plant outside the community diversifies resident employment but adds little to diversification of the Town's tax base.

Many respondents feel that efforts to diversify the economic base must ensure that the oil companies that have contributed much to the development of the community are not alienated. Respondents suggest that the Town develop incentive packages to attract small business to the community.

Other respondents note that residents have not supported local businesses as required. For example there used to be a movie theatre, car dealership, men's clothing store, and a barbershop. Oil companies encourage sub-contractors to buy locally but the sub-contractors claim this is too expensive.

There is also a large female work force that cannot presently get jobs within the community. Many observed this is an important labour force surplus which could be productively utilized by new businesses in the area.

Municipal Services

The Town of Swan Hills currently has agreements with I.D. 17 for the provision of fire protection, sanitary landfill use, and ambulance service. These agreements may need review and updating. There are no agreements between the Town and I.D.s 15 and 16 for similar services.

Respondents note that there are many special interest volunteer groups making a significant contribution within the community.

In terms of facilities, many respondents feel there is a need for a larger community hall for special functions and activities.

High School

Respondents who favor the location of a high school in the Town feel that it offers a sense of stability and long term viability. Those who are against the location of a high school in the Town feel their children could get a better education by attending a school in Barrhead.

Housing

Many respondents feel there is a need for a coordinated housing policy among the oil companies. There is a belief that residents living in subsidized housing do not get involved in the community and therefore are not as committed.

Many of those interviewed note the reluctance of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to guarantee mortgage loans adds to the stability question faced by the Town. This is further aggravated with the local bank requiring a 25% down-payment before residents can secure a home mortgage.

Two housing factors affecting the stability of the community involve: the difficulty of attracting a housing developer to provide market housing; and the difficulty faced by women who wish to live on their own but who cannot afford the high cost of housing.

Town Council and Administration

Respondents feel the oil companies and provincial government must indicate they are committed to the community for the long term. Many feel the Town, working with the provincial government and the oil companies, must develop a vision of where the Town is presently, where it is going in the future and how it will get there. Many view the colloquium as an excellent starting point for this process.

Government Human Service Agencies

Many of those interviewed feel the government agencies need to build greater visibility and public awareness of programs within the community. Some suspect a multi-use government building would contribute to stability through high visibility and implied commitment. Others indicate a provincial building would contribute little.

MUNICIPAL TAXATION

Assessment Base Mix

Swan Hills does not have a residential-industrial mixed tax base and therefore relies heavily upon residential assessment for property tax revenues. The community needs to work towards a more balanced assessment base that results in commercial/industrial assessment as a greater proportion of the total assessment.

Economic Diversification

Some respondents indicate that the diversification of the Town's economic base will require lower taxes for commercial/industrial developments and developing industrial land. This would have to be compensated for by raising residential taxes.

Respondents indicate the Town is faced with a "Catch 22" situation. It cannot afford to raise taxes on residential properties, yet without an increase in Town revenues it cannot afford to develop the needed industrial land to attract new industry and broaden the assessment base.

The Town does not have the money for residential and/or commercial land development. This kind of development can only take place once a commitment is made by individuals or companies needing lots. For the Town of Swan Hills, the key question is: What comes first - the supply of lots or the demand? This is a classic reactive versus proactive community development question.

The Town has a municipal general plan and a business development plan. However, respondents indicate that high business taxes discourage business investment. Those interviewed also suggested there are residents who would like to start a small business but are discouraged by the tax structure and levy.

Municipal Services

If the tax levy remains the same, municipal services will have to be downsized beginning as early as January 1989. To operate the existing municipal services at the present level will require more money, but Swan Hills already has municipal taxes that are twice as high as surrounding municipalities. The present Town Council is against a tax increase. Some of the oil companies have expressed concern about the amount of taxes paid to the Improvement Districts and the lack of services received.

High School

Most of the respondents indicate that they would like to see a high school in Swan Hills. However, it is not clear from the interviews whether they want a high school building and program, or simply a high school program. At the present time, the existing school facilities could accommodate high school students.

If the community wishes a separate high school building, then funds will be needed from the property tax base and will require a tax increase. As the current student/teacher ratio is well below the accepted provincial standard, it is unlikely the provincial government will support the development of a new building.

Housing

Many of the respondents suggested that those living in company-owned and subsidized housing may be discouraged from purchasing a home because of the high taxes. Citizens who presently own their home are also dissatisfied with the high taxes.

Town Council and Administration

The existing administration and Council are viewed, by many of the respondents, as prudent financial managers who face a very difficult situation. The Town Council has developed plans to address present

problems and plan for the future. However, those interviewed indicate that financial resource limitations will make it difficult for the community to implement such plans.

IMAGE

Economic Diversification

The negative image of Swan Hills held by small business and industry appears to be based on: the long distance from markets; and the lack of railway lines to transport raw materials and finished products.

The negative image held by community residents towards their own small businesses appears to be based on:

(a) higher prices of goods and services;
(b) lack of variety of goods and services;
(c) lack of good customer service;
(d) lack of competition; and
(e) a perception that the small business attitude is "get rich quick".

Municipal Services

Respondents indicate the Town provides excellent services in the areas of recreation (e.g. library and the indoor swimming pool) and public works. The oil companies have traditionally contributed much to community facilities and are currently doing so with the golf course.

Providing excellent municipal services, many believe, will help to generate a positive image for the community. Town Council believe they have an excellent staff and this is the key to maintaining such services.

High School

Respondents feel there is a need for a high school in order to change the image of the Town from a transient community to that of a stable community. A high school would help to attract oil company employees with teenage children.

Housing

Because of the image that Swan Hills has outside the community, the oil companies feel they are required to provide subsidized housing to attract and retain employees.

Town Council and Administration

Many respondents feel the Town Council has a leadership responsibility for generating a positive image of the community. The Council has been responding to this responsibility by working with other nearby communities and by networking with other groups. As a result, the Council has a reputation of being able to work well with other groups.

Government Human Service Agencies

"Swan Hills is in the middle of nowhere and on the edge of everything." Swan Hills is located on the perimeter on almost every government administrative area. Many respondents feel there is an obvious visible lack of presence by the provincial government and therefore a lack of government commitment to the community.

Individuals from Swan Hills are often required to travel outside the community to access government services, contributing to the community's image of isolation. Depending upon the nature of the service required, a resident may travel to a number of centres to deal with the appropriate government departments.

The government human service agencies' view Swan Hills as a nice, quiet community when they compare it to other communities they service. Their statistics show that the present level of service provided to Swan Hills is adequate. In the past, provincial agencies have responded to a proven need by increasing services when required.

Many respondents feel that most government services are adequate but they must be more consistent and regular. They also feel that the lack of consistent service implies the government agencies, and therefore the provincial government, is not committed to the community.

Many of the respondents indicate that there is a need for a coordinated effort among government human service agencies. This would create public awareness of available services and the schedule of services. They also indicate that agencies should ideally attempt to service the community on the same day or at least the same week.

CONCLUSION

You are now more familiar with the issues faced in the Swan Hills area. Some issues in this Discussion Paper have been addressed several times while others have been given less attention. The overall intent has been to document as many of the relationships while presenting a variety of the perspectives of the issues.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

On October 26 and 27, 1988, respondents will meet for a colloquium in Swan Hills. This will provide an opportunity for respondents to:

(a) get to know the other participants (as listed in Appendix B)
(b) develop an understanding of how others view these issues;
(c) seek clarification of items in this discussion paper;
d) work with other participants to develop action plans; and
e) establish networks for follow-up with other participants.

COME PREPARED TO SHARE YOUR KNOWLEDGE, EXPERIENCE AND INSIGHTS

AND

COME PREPARED TO LEARN AND ENJOY YOURSELF.

APPENDIX A

SWAN HILLS COLLOQUIUM CONSULTING TEAM

Policy Research Services
Municipal Services Branch
Alberta Municipal Affairs
Edmonton, Alberta

Principle Consultant
Lyle Benson, President of Benson Enterprises, Hinton, Alberta.

My expertise is in organizational development, and in leadership management and supervisory training. In the first area I use the "Total Work Performance" program. In the second area I use the "Wholistic Leadership Development Model". Both of those programs focus on 3 sets of skills, essential for the effectiveness and efficiency of every organization, team, and individual. These are Work skills, People skills and Self skills.

A major portion of my consulting business has been with the Alberta Government. I have a proven record of positive results after working effectively with Alberta Recreation and Parks:

- The Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation
- The Volunteer Leadership Development Section
- The Alberta Sport Council, and
- The Blue Lake Centre.

other organizations I have worked with include:

- Provincial Youth Associations
- Provincial Camping Associations
- Schools
- City Departments
- Churches, Real Estate Agencies, and Societies

Associate Consultant
Floyd Dykeman, Director of the Rural and Small Town Research and Studies Programme, Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick.

As an associate to the Swan Hills Colloquium process I am bringing my practical experiences from both private and public sector business and continuing my involvement with single industry resources communities. Current pursuits have been in the area of regional and rural land use, resource and economic development plans, policies, and program design and implementation, governmental/public sector policy and development co-ordination, development conflict resolutions and community economic development.

I will bring to the colloquium a working knowledge of the information contained in the research paper "Canadian Single Industry Communities: Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography", published in Sackville, New Brunswick.

APPENDIX B

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